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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000079

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#)

SUBJECT: COMEDIAN AHMED AHMED CIRCUMVENTS RELIGIOUS POLICE  
TO PERFORM BEFORE MIXED-GENDER AUDIENCE IN JEDDAH

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Classified By: CG Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On February 21, well-known Egyptian-American comedian Ahmed Ahmed and other comedians performed in Jeddah before a mixed-gender audience of nearly 1000 Saudis and expats, who were regaled by comic routines on sensitive topics ranging from the Mutawwa (religious police) to Arabic-style dating, often with explicit language and innuendo. The performance, held at a remote location, was announced the same day in order to reduce the likelihood of interference from the CPVPV (Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) religious police. END SUMMARY.

2.(C) AHMED AHMED AND FRIENDS: The group of comedians, including several Saudis, were sponsored by Comedy Arabia, an online comedy channel and social networking organization, along with Smile Productions, a Saudi promoter. The star of the show was Ahmed Ahmed ([www.ahmed-ahmed.com](http://www.ahmed-ahmed.com)), who has spent much of his career touring the U.S., appearing on numerous film and television shows, including the Tonight Show, Comedy Central and MTV's PUNK'D. His current Middle East tour brought him to Lebanon, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, with performances in both Riyadh and Jeddah.

3.(C) LAST-MINUTE RESCHEDULING: The original performance was supposed to take place on February 20 evening at the Italian Cultural Club in Jeddah (this country's only foreign cultural center). Ticket-holders were notified the morning of the event that lead performer Ahmed Ahmed had lost his reservation on a Riyadh-Jeddah flight and would be forced to travel by car, thereby delaying the show by a full day. (NOTE: The Italian Cultural Club, with its popular pasta restaurant, proscenium stage, and pop music in an outdoor piazza, has been under pressure by the Mutawwa recently to curtail operations and is now open only one night a week, Thursday. It is possible that the real reason for the delay was the issue of finding a new venue. END NOTE.) The final locale chosen for the February 21 event was a small compound called "White Tents Resort," located far away from the main commercial centers of Jeddah, with dim-lit desert roads providing the only access. Ahmed Ahmed commented during his routine that he felt he was being taken to "an underground grave."

14. (C) MIXED-GENDER AUDIENCE: The audience, estimated at 1,000, cheered wildly when Ahmed Ahmed asked: "Who in the audience is Saudi?" Although there were some jokes in Arabic, the fast-paced performance was almost entirely in English, geared to a primary audience of foreign-educated Saudis with some expats. The audience sat in mixed-gender seating, a practice rare in the Kingdom, where

strictly-enforced religious custom dictates physical separation of men and women at social events -- usually by means of a non-transparent partition. Many young Saudi women were observed wearing neither the traditional abaya (black gown) nor the hijab (veil).

15. (C) HUMOR ON SENSITIVE TOPICS: The comedians, Ahmed Ahmed and several Saudi nationals, did not shy away from addressing sensitive issues, including: the role of the Mutawwa, how to evade police check points, racist attitudes towards foreign workers, the right (or lack thereof) of women to drive in the Kingdom, the attire of women, dating practices, and circumventing the ban on Valentine's Day celebrations. Many jokes used explicit language with sexual, racial and ethnic innuendo -- though little focus on any particular group. The audience, laughing heartily and obviously relishing this rare opportunity in Saudi Arabia, did not appear to mind in the least the racy, nightclub humor.

16. (C) MUSLIM ARABS IN THE US: Throughout the performance Ahmed Ahmed related his experiences as a Muslim and an Arab in the United States, with his familiar comic lines about being screened at airports and his brief detention after 9/11. Much of the routine drew on his contention that Muslim Arabs have replaced African-Americans and other ethnic groups as objects of stereotyping.

17. (C) COMMENT: Large scale cultural and social events with mixed-gender audiences are occurring with increasing frequency in Jeddah. Electronic media including text messages, email, and Facebook, make it possible to announce venues for events at the last minute limiting the possibility of crackdowns by the religious police and allowing for large audiences. Recent Mutawwa action against the Italian Cultural Club indicates that conservative religious

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authorities, even in "relatively liberal" Jeddah, are not ready yet to concede too much social space. END COMMENT.  
QUINN